

PRIMAVERA 2004

Roy Ananda and Julia Robinson [SA], Natasha Johns-Messenger [Vic], Nick Mangan [Vic], PVI Collective [WA], Huseyin Sami [NSW], Sangeeta Sandrasegar [Vic], Sandra Selig [Qld], Neal Smith [NSW], Tim Sterling [SA]
Curator Vivienne Webb

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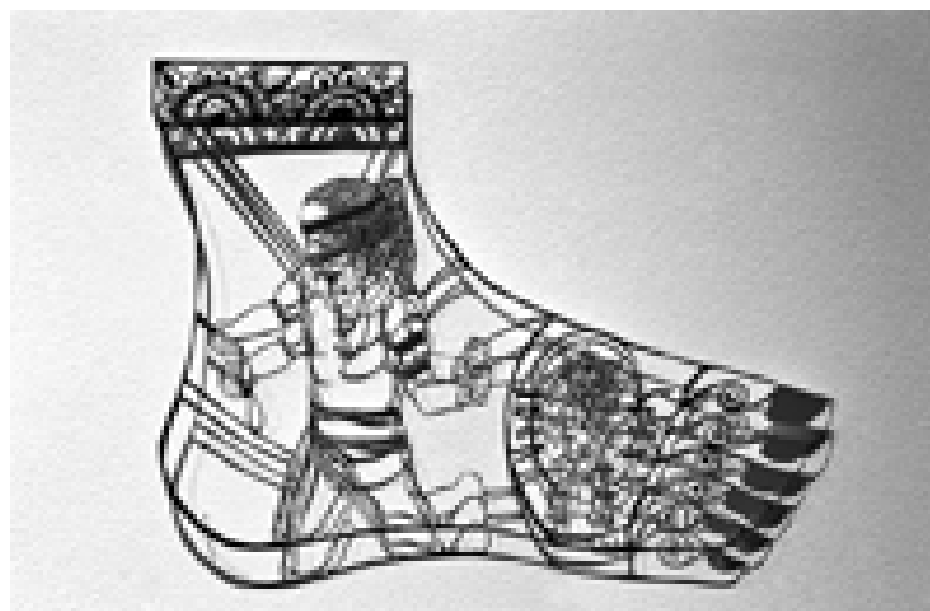
There was something distinctly constrained about this year's *Primavera*. Not only did the placement of works often seem overly polite, but the works themselves often emitted a sense of hermetic isolation. In addition, the process-orientation of such work frequently valorised over determined excesses of manual labour. Such excesses though are by no means of a Bataille order and did not function subversively in any way as a celebration of an alternative [repressed] artistic economy of wasted expenditure. Instead, much of the interiority of the works appeared to result from the seemingly autodidactic levels of self-control exercised in their realisation. Consequently, much of the work sat all too comfortably within the prescribed museological space of the MCA. In fact, many works inadvertently celebrated their own inertia, and by doing so, the contemporary identity of art as series of atrophied museum artefacts pre-determined in advance. At the same time, the pairing within this exhibition of minimalist and 'maximalist' aesthetics continually reminded the viewer of the maximal means by which even the most 'uncompromising' minimal works have been achieved. Despite this, there were uncanny moments, which even if they failed to unsettle, nevertheless achieved a level of unexpected strangeness. The overt spatiality of certain other works pointed to a deliberate move away from the production of contemporary art as the unquestioned revalidation of isolable and easily commodifiable aesthetic objects. Indeed, some of these spatialised works further attested to the authoritarian and institutional 'control spaces' of which our society is ever increasingly composed and whose perceived affects have at some level influenced much of the work in this show.

Nick Mangan's group of four discreetly arranged objects instantly belied its prior conception as contemporary museological artefact. Each work was painstakingly crafted *in extremis*, thematically testifying to the uncanny intersection of organic and man-made forms. These objects invited the viewer to wonder in awe at the many hours of labour spent crafting their illusionistic surfaces. However, such an emphasis ultimately burdened the works, whose hermetic iconography tended to emphasise the bravura of material production and an isolated aestheticism over their communicative capacity. This was not helped by the fact that each object

had been physically separated from its actual surrounds by being placed upon low-lying white museum plinths. This tendency towards regressive display methodologies only stressed the identity of Mangan's objects primarily as removable aesthetic commodities. That said, the metamorphic quality of works like *Untitled [Nest]*, a ladder in the process of becoming a native ant's nest and *Respirator*, a dust mask sprouting branches, at times achieved a genuine sense of the uncanny and dreamlike.

Huseyin Sami deconstructs the traditional spaces of painting through emphasising it as a semi-accidental organic process. His *Vest Rack* consisted of a series of individually coloured poured-paint forms, drooped over posts extending from the wall. Overall, the work appeared as a cross between the discarded results of a series of repeated painterly 'accidents' or bizarre prototypes for a conceptual clothing range. Nearby, Sami's *Wall Spaghetti* consisted of strands of acrylic paint that had set and then been stretched over one another to cover one of the walls. The work was a lightly ironic and conceptually elegant take on the textured all-over surfaces of abstract expressionist painting – here robbed of its gestural angst and reduced to a collection of individually extruded threads.

Sangeeta Sandrasegar's *Goddess of Flowers* series took as its starting point the life of Indian cult figure Phoolan Devi, the 'bandit queen' who after suffering much personal abuse, fiercely and violently fought to defend not only her individual rights but those of similarly dispossessed and patriarchally oppressed low-caste women. The series of linear painstakingly cut-out cardboard images of hands and feet, depicted within their graphic outlines scenes from Devi's legendary life. Unfortunately, knowledge of the intense political and social conviction of the real 'bandit queen' seemed somehow at odds in this instance, when represented via laboriously decorative means. Neal Smith's large wall-mounted beige monochrome reliefs similarly formally emphasised linear and graphic qualities. *Mobile Future 1* and *2*, were derived from the highly abstracted appearance of Japanese toy robots. The somewhat cryptographic nature of these painting-objects however, tended to emphasise them as purely formalist exercises, rather than works of any conceptual import. Roy Ananda and Julia Robinson's *Thousand Fold* likewise adopted a rather formalist approach. Physically the work was comprised of a multitude of folded, ambiguous semi-architectonic raw cardboard objects that splayed out across the gallery, occupying both wall and floor space – or rather the horizontal space of yet another discreetly made-to-measure plinth. The individual objects, said to address issues of memory and its relation to such things as a child's contact with the surprising hinged-spaces of pop-up books, ultimately seemed simultaneously repetitiously blank and impenetrably vague.



Aside from the predominantly object-based works there were several others which interrogated issues of spatiality from differing conceptual perspectives. Related to Roy Ananda/Robinson's piece in its modular and architectonic ramifications was Tim Sterling's, *one-two, one-two* – made from deconstructed plastic milk-crates of the kind endemically used as furniture in student and share households, which cast an ironic backward glance at the rather puritanical, systematic formalism of 1970s minimalist Sol LeWitt. Here Sterling domesticated the quasi-mathematical pretensions of LeWitt's generally ahistoricist output. Thus *one-two, one-two* appeared decidedly wry and absurd, rather than grand in its formal aspirations. Meanwhile the work's title may be read as a sardonic exposure of the authoritarian rigidity of true minimalism and its parallel covert relationship to the authoritarian spaces of supposedly democratic contemporary political regimes, that promise designer lifestyles for the avaricious elite and increasingly, make-do survival for everyone else. Also suggestive of the pervasive authoritarianism of our times was Natasha Johns-Messenger's interconnected series of walk-in spaces entitled, *Picture This*. On one level this work dealt with the phenomenology of perception as evoked by its title. More interestingly though, and perhaps not entirely intentionally, the work's successful deployment of angled mirrors confused and disorientated the habitual spatial understandings of visitors. At the same time it reconfigured the space of the museum as an enclosed space for surveillance, where one spies and is spied on by other gallery goers, often unawares. Perhaps inadvertently, the work also conjured and reversed the banal demand, itself an excuse for social control, that as worthy citizens [doubling as paranoid subjects] we must remain perpetually 'alert but not alarmed.'

Obviously levels of contemporary social control are achieved through the growing deployment of surveillance technologies in major urban centres like Sydney. The PVI [Performance, Video, Installation] Collective from Perth, aimed through its performance, *Panopticon-Sydney* to explicitly point out, albeit it in a humorous fashion, the

proliferating use of such technologies. While the conceptual premise of this collective work was socially pertinent, its constrictively formalist presentation as suitably object-determined 'art' completely undermined its original social orientation. Finally, Sandra Selig's *Synthetic Infinite*, another spatial work, was admirable for its overall economy of means. It combined incomprehensible lengths of red thread wound across the gallery space to create an undulating three-dimensional waveform with a sub-bass audio sound-scape. Despite the work's formal success, there remained a seemingly irreconcilable distance between its spatial and audio elements. Likewise, rather than interrogative or surprising, the work offered the audience a diffuse, ambient experience eminently suited to the institutional space of the MCA.

Overall a sense of disappointment affected this *Primavera*, attributable to the largely formalist inclinations of the artworks, and on such a level, those works were generally successful. However, exhibited within a broader context of the threat of increasingly regressive political and social agendas, such a formalist embrace seems even more worrying. It is somehow vaguely distressing that so-called 'emerging art', conditioned by this context, does not evince a greater sense of its non-complicity and that it seems more concerned to get things 'right' and to appear indisputably as institutionally and professionally 'valid' contemporary art – which it is. Eventually, such issues are beyond the conceptual parameters of an exhibition like *Primavera*. But then again, maybe such an assumption is also a crucial contributing factor to why such exhibitions generally make little attempt to explore more expanded social territory. Of course, maybe I have missed the point altogether. Maybe what such formally orientated work actually represents is the triumph of the multiple de-territorialising aesthetic codes of a 'minor language.' Perhaps the work in this year's *Primavera* is not so much hermetic and insular, but seeks instead to establish an aesthetic 'parallel universe', rather than merely respond negatively in opposition to the dialectics of societal values.